

Can I Depend on You?

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Summary: This is what I consider a oneshot, though it is much longer than any that I've read... But I'm content with it and so was the person who requested it! Hanabi is a small Izakaya passed down to two young women after the owner passed away. It has played host to many different groups, but none as interesting as the Shinsengumi. What adventures will they experience in this tale?

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It had been a peaceful day in Kyoto; at least it had been before Mai had come into contact with a group of Rounin. They barred her path, smirks playing on their lips and eyes glinting suspiciously. Mai cleared her throat nervously and attempted to work her way around the men. They stepped into her path yet again and their lips stretched into larger grins.

"Excuse me, I need to get-"

"What's the rush?" one man questioned.

"Yeah, why can't you just stick around awhile?" another also inquired while taking hold of Mai's arm.

She tried to pull away with an apology, but the man's grip refused to waver and jerked her back towards the men. Mai gave a gasp and quietly demanded to be released; they, however, did not comply. The men requested some entertainment from her and she declined, asking them to release her once more and again they refused her wishes.

"Come on; it's the least you can do for patriots!"

"'Patriots?'" she tried yet again to pull away from his

grasp.

"We're the ones protecting this country; it's only natural for a pretty girl like you to entertain patriots!"

"I told you no! Let me go!" Mai finally found her voice and struggled against his grip.

The men growled and closed in forming a tight circle around Mai.

"I'm pretty sure she said she wanted to get away from you low lives." A cheeky voice gained the group's attention. Now standing behind the Rounin and Mai was a man wearing a long light blue haori and a metal headband tied around his forehead. The umber hair that fell into his face framed it only allowing his brilliant peridot green eyes to shine through in the sunlight. His lips curled into a cheeky and playful smile as his eyes scanned over the scene taking in every detail.

Most of the men exchanged glances and some scoffed at the intrusion. "Mind your own business!"

An amused light glistened in the man's eyes in that moment. "This happens to be my business; you're all disturbing the peace! So, are you going to let the girl go or should I resort to using force?" his hand fell to the katana at his hip and his weight shifted into a comfortable stance to draw it if the situation took a turn for the worst.

Suddenly it seemed that realization hit one of the Rounin as he released a few sputters of what could have been words and took a few steps away from Mai and the rest of his group. When asked what he was afraid of he pointed a finger to the swordsman before them with a shaking finger. "He's-he's part of the Shinsengumi!"

His comrades questioned his words and looked to the subject of fear before they too perceived just who was in their presence. Most of the group hurriedly stepped away from Mai, but the one who had originally taken hold of her simply scoffed and released her arm to stand right in front of the supposed Shinsengumi member. "He's only one member; he's not that scary!" he proceeded to laugh in the other man's face.

The one wearing the Haori looked the arrogant man over and gave a few chuckles himself before he grabbed the collar of his kimono and drew his sword to rest it along the inside of the man's neck. The swordsman's moves were so smooth and flowing; nearly flawless. He did not even bat an eye to his actions and his smile never left his face. The once arrogant Rounin now looked into the amused eyes of the Shinsengumi member and a loud audible gulp could be heard in his throat. "Not scary, huh; then you won't be afraid when I kill you?"

After a long, drawn out moment, the Rounin pulled away earning a small nick on his neck. His eyes were fearful as he slowly stepped away towards the rest of his group. "W-whatever! Keep your nose out of our business next time!"

And with that, the men fled down a near alley and out of sight.

A whistle was heard and drew Mai's attention to a short, young brunette approaching her and her savior. This second man wore a matching haori to Mai's rescuer and seemed to know the man quite well as he spoke. "Wow, Souji that was interesting. I'm surprised you let them go!"

The first man chuckled and shrugged his shoulders. "I figured they were scared enough. We'll consider it their warning; next time, I'll definitely kill them!"

"Ummâ€¦ Excuse me," Mai managed to find her voice and quietly spoke up.

"Mmm; you're still here?" the one addressed as Souji glanced over at her with a bored look, the smile finally gone from his lips.

"T-thank you for stepping in like that." Mai offered a low bow.

Souji, bored, waved a hand to her and turned, walking down the busy street.

Mai snapped her head back up and called after him, "Wait!" She ran after his retreating body and managed to come to a stop in his path. When she looked up to him, his face seemed to twist into irritation; completely opposite from his previous battle.

"What do you want?"

"I-I just wanted to invite you to the izakaya I work at. If you're ever hungry, please stop by Hanabi on the main street; I would be happy to serve you and any comrades of yours!" Mai bowed low once more in front of her rescuer.

A snicker seemed to release from his throat, "We'll see about that."

Mai gazed up at him with a happy, hopeful smile.

"But, if you get in my way again," the cheeky smile seemed to return to his lips as he paused in the middle of his sentence. "I won't hesitate to kill you." He chuckled to himself as he walked by the shocked Mai.

His brunette friend tried to smile at Mai and reassured that they would eventually take her up on her offer and followed after his fellow Shinsengumi member.

"Heey, Souji, is that really anyway to talk to a girl who just offered to serve you in an izakaya?"

His friend laughed a hearty laugh. "I just wanted to see the look of shock on her face. It's just too fun to tease girls."

The brunette sighed and shook his head. "Man, I don't get guys like you. Shinpachi's the same way; you guys are weird."

"Don't compare me to that loud mouth!" Souji laughed and continued on

his patrol route leaving his young friend shaking his head and heading on his own route.

"Hey! You guys still open?" Souji pushed the cloth in the doorway away from his face as he led his fellow Shinsengumi members inside the izakaya that was recommended to him. Everyone piled in and looked around and the fairly small shop with small tables and few decorations. One of the men whistled as he eyed the room and crossed his arms.

"It certainly isn't like what we're used toâ€|" his voice was disappointed at the absence of women and other customers.

"Don't complain Shinpachi; Souji says there are women here and that can't mean that sake is far!" the redheaded companion smiled and nudged his close friend.

Finally, from the back, came a slender woman with long brown hair tied in a high pony tail. Her brown eyes scanned the group of men surprised at the late arrival. "I'm sorryâ€| we were planning on closing up shop."

"You're going to turn down our business? Can you afford to do that; it looks like you don't get much business." Shinpachi lazily gazed around the shop again.

"Shinpachi!" the redhead and young brunette scolded with slight glares.

A glare was also beginning to surface on the woman's face. She eyed the men, "What brings you here?"

"A girl who works here offered to serve us if we ever came in!" the youngest of the group smiled.

The woman sighed and glanced at the back room, her glare intensifying. "Excuse me for a moment." And she trudged into the back room. "Mai!"

Mai turned from the large tub full of dishes and smiled at her cousin. "Yes, Saki?"

"What are you doing offering our shop to the Shinsengumi?!"

"I'm sorryâ€|?" She cocked her head to the side.

"I don't want the Shinsengumi coming in here and tarnishing our name! People will stop coming here out of fear of those men!"

"But they're not bad people, Saki."

"Have you not heard the rumors; are you deaf?!"

"One of those men saved me, Saki; they can't be all that bad if they're protecting the capital and its people!"

Saki sighed and looked away. It was frustrating trying to reason with Mai when her mind was set. Mai's angered state slowly melted away and her expression softened as she looked on her cousin.

"Just give them a chance Saki. It would be wrong to turn them away without getting to know what they're like."

Saki glanced at her young cousin and gave a defeated sigh. "Fine; but you're serving them. Get to work!"

Mai blinked in confusion and, dumbfounded, gazed at Saki.

"They're here now, I thought you knew."

"What?!" Mai screeched as she flung herself through the curtains into the main dining room.

A few familiar faces stuck out and the face of the young brunette smiled brightly at her. "There she is!"

Souji's lips curved into a cocky smile, "Ready to wait on us hand and foot?"

"Hey, Souji, I don't think that's what she meantâ€|" Heisuke frowned at the older member.

"Oh? Well, she should have been clearer in her offer; but she still has to serve us, she promised she would." His smirk never dropped from his face.

Shinpachi cheered and continued forward into the izakaya. He glanced at the tables and commented on their small size. From there, he took it upon himself to push multiple tables together to accommodate their party. Saki stepped out from the back and stood beside Mai, arms crossed as she inspected the Shinsengumi.

The tall red headed man noticed Saki's disapproving look and offered an apologetic smile as he walked to her side. "Sorry about our group; they're a bit of a rowdy bunch."

"I betâ€|" Saki glanced quickly at him, letting him know she disapproved of their presence.

"Oy, Sano! Help us out here!" Shinpachi called over with a large smile.

"It looks like you've got it covered. Just try to be considerate of the wonderful ladies willing to serve us!" Sanosuke attempted to ease the uneasiness of Saki.

In return he merely got a slight glare and stern lash from her, "Flattery will not work here, _Sir_." Her voice almost like acid.

Sanosuke nervously laughed and nodded and took his seat amongst his fellow members.

"So," Souji started. "Where's the owner of this place? I figured he would greet us by now."

"You're looking at her." Saki stated standing as straight as she could.

Sanosuke lifted a brow, "_You_ own this place?"

"It was originally my fathers, but since he's passed, I've taken over."

Heisuke exhaled in awe and shifted excitedly against the ground. "That's exciting!"

"Oy, let's have a drink to honorâ€|" Shinpachi paused as he dug around his brain, searching for a name. Nothing surfaced.

Sanosuke began to laugh. "How can you honor someone when you don't ask for their name?"

"How can you honor someone you don't even know?" Saki corrected.

"That part's not so hard; but we need booze to do any kind of honoring!" Heisuke stated and threw a glance at Mai. "How about some sake, huh?"

Mai jolted to life remembering that she was indeed a server and she had offered her services to these men. "Right!" and she bolted into the back preparing the bottles and the alcohol.

The men cheered as she brought out the long white containers. They distributed the dishes and poured sake for each other. Saki only shook her head at the impatience of the men.

Souji glanced up from the table to the young Mai placing the full sake bottles around the men. A playful smirk jumped to his lips and he poured an extra serving of sake. He called Mai over and lifted the saucer to her, "Want to drink to your success?"

Suddenly, the sake was snatched away from his hand and a glare was bearing down on him. "She's not old enough!" Saki scolded the young Shinsengumi member.

All of the men quieted down and gazed at the owner. Heisuke was the first to speak in an innocent voice. "But she can't be much younger than meâ€| I don't see the problem."

And in a flash Saki's glare turned to him. He shivered at her anger and looked away not wanting to make eye contact. Mai tried to calm things by giving a laugh although it came out quite nervous.

"I'm not really interested in drinking anyway! Sorry!"

Souji scoffed and returned to his own sake muttering to himself.

"Then why don't you drink with us?" Sanosuke boldly inquired. Everyone focused on him. "How can we drink to honor you if neither of you drink with us?"

Saki stared at him for a moment before sighing and giving in. "Fine," she spat out just before downing her saucer of sake. Her face contorted to show the bitter taste that slid down her throat. She coughed lightly and Mai patted her back in a comforting manner. The men laughed together and followed Saki's actions, but sighed contently with the taste. Immediately, they poured more alcohol

around the table and asked for food from Mai.

She nodded and headed to the back room to prepare plates for the large group. She dashed back and forth across the room to gather the ingredients and platters to place it on. It took more time than she had hoped, but she came back into the dining room with a smile and a portion of the platters in her hands.

To her surprise, when she entered, she saw her cousin sitting at the redheaded man's side and poured him sake when his saucer was empty. In return he would pour her a saucer of sake. As Mai distributed the food amongst the men her cousin refused the sake offered to her from time to time, but Shinpachi would comment that she was no fun, or that it would be rude to decline Sanosuke's offer. It was then that she would take the saucer and shoot the alcohol down to show Shinpachi up.

The men would laugh and continue their cheers of sake and eat the food that Mai brought them. Eventually, Souji called her over and patted the floor next to him. Slowly, she took the offer and sat on her knees beside him. He slowly sipped at the little sake left in his saucer and just sat with a relaxed smile. Mai noticed his empty saucer and offered to pour him some more.

He turned his gaze to her and his smile widened. "Why not?"

She nodded and lifted the bottle in hand. She quickly glanced at him as he watched her pour his drink. She cleared her throat and returned her eyes to the saucer so as not to spill anything. "How much have you had? You don't seem very affected by the sake." She managed to comment.

He laughed and brought the saucer to his lips. "This doesn't even compare to the amount that we drink on typical nights; but it looks like your cousin is taking a hard hit." He laughed again and sipped at his drink.

Mai looked to her cousin still seated by Sanosuke and gawked. Her typically calm and proper cousin giggled wildly and swayed in her seated position. Her face was tinted a noticeable pink likely from her large consumption of alcohol. Sanosuke and Heisuke chuckled at her woozy state and propped her up, keeping her from falling to the ground. Mai rose from her seat and hurried over to Saki and took hold of her hands. She questioned on the state of her cousin only to get a giggling response.

Sanosuke laughed and placed a large hand on Mai's shoulder. "Sorry, guess we pushed her too far!"

From across the table, Shinpachi laughed hysterically. He was obviously just as drunk as Saki if not more. His cheeks were also tinted pink and he fought to keep himself from falling on his side.

"We should probably get back to headquarters!" Heisuke laughed, looking at Shinpachi's state. Souji nodded with Sanosuke and they both stood without a problem. Sanosuke helped Saki to her feet and caught the giggling girl as she stumbled forward on her drunken feet. Heisuke helped Shinpachi and surprisingly supported the large man with his own small frame.

"Maybe we should help these two home. It's the least we can do after getting her so drunk." Sanosuke chuckled looking to Souji.

Souji glanced back, "Why do I have to help? Have Heisuke help you with them."

"I've got my hands full with Shinpachi!" Heisuke complained as he was halfway out the door.

Souji sighed and rolled his eyes while crossing his arms in a huff. "Fine, but you're taking care of the drunk one."

Sanosuke laughed and nodded.

Mai glanced at the pouting Souji walking beside her. Both Sanosuke and Souji had followed her instructions to deliver both girls to their home. Though she insisted that they didn't need to accompany them, Sanosuke would not take no for an answer. Though Souji did not seem too fond of the idea, he did not seem to put up a hard fight to refuse his services. Sanosuke hoisted Saki onto his back and bid Mai lead the way, and they were off down the dark streets of Kyoto.

Mai fiddled with her fingers and glanced at the man beside her. "Ummâ€¦ Thank you for this."

Souji shrugged giving no other response to her thanks.

Mai sighed and looked forward once again. Things were silent between her and Souji, but she could hear the light chuckling of Sanosuke behind them. He must have been having a conversation with Saki; as much of a conversation he could have with a drunken woman.

Before long, Mai had successfully led the men to her house and let them in. Once inside, Souji stepped to the side and looked around the small, simple home. Mai led Sanosuke to her cousin's room where she was placed delicately on her bed. She thanked Sanosuke for his help with Saki and turned to join Souji once again only to see him leaning against the door frame. His eyes scanned the small room taking in the two small bed rolls squeezed into the small room. Mai noticed his eyebrow raise and his eyes fell to her.

"This is really where you live?"

"Souji," Sanosuke sighed as he stood from Saki's side.

"Come on; don't tell me you don't have something to say about this, Harada."

Harada glanced away almost looking ashamed.

"Like the fact of how small their house is; or the fact that there is no man in this household?"

Mai fiddled with her fingers and chewed on her bottom lip. "Well," she slowly started. "My uncle was the one who took care of me after my parents died. He looked after me and Saki and when we were old enough we started working for him at the izakaya. He passed away about a year ago though, and Saki and I have been taking care of his business and ourselves ever since."

Harada smiled softly and placed his large hand on her head. "That sounds like it was hard, but it sounds like you two are strong enough to handle it."

"Don't let it go to your head." Souji inserted into the conversation.

Sanosuke shook his head and looked to Mai again. "If you need help with anything, anything at all, don't hesitate to come find us sometime."

Mai looked up to Sanosuke with glittering eyes. Hearing such kinda words made her heart soar with happiness.

"I'm going to hold you to that promise," the slurred words came from behind. Saki sat up from her bed roll fighting the swaying of her still intoxicated body.

"You should be in bed Saki!" Mai called out.

"What kind of host would I be if I didn't see my guests off?"

Sanosuke smiled and nodded to her. "We'll keep our promise to help whenever you need it."

Souji scoffed. "Speak for yourself."

Saki managed a smile and nodded to the men as they left their house. Mai helped her cousin lie back on her bed roll and Saki smiled up at her. She shrugged her shoulders, "I guess you were right; they aren't all that badâ€¦"

Mai smiled happily knowing that her cousin approved of the Shinsengumi men. Perhaps they would be seeing more business from them soon.

Mai jogged down the darkening streets of Kyoto, large bento boxes in hand. The Ikedaya Inn ordered a large amount of food from Hanabi to feed their large group of guests. It was unusual for an inn to order food from an izakaya for its guests, but apparently they had a large number that they could not all account for. And so Mai found herself running through the empty and dark streets for a delivery.

The owner welcomed her into the inn and ushered her to the stairs with a few boxes of the delivered food begging her to help serve a handful of guests. She insisted that she should get back to her own izakaya, but he insisted with pleading eyes. She sighed and agreed as she ascended the stairs. Calling into the rooms, she politely delivered the food to large groups of men. She nervously laughed at some of the men that answered her calls as they were large and some with scared faces. She noticed many of them had swords at their sides or in their arms; that meant that many of them were samurai.

She wondered why so many samurai would be gathered at one inn in one night. She shrugged brushing off the thought and kneeling before one last door, calling politely to the resident of the room. There was a long pause before a man came to the door. Mai peered up at the unusual man taking in his blond hair and piercing red eyes

immediately. She gulped feeling uneasy under his hard gaze.

"What do you want?" His deep voice almost seemed to boom in Mai's ears even though he spoke softly. Mai fumbled on her words trying to recover her nerves and this caused the pale man towering above her to raise an irritated eyebrow. "Speak, or do you want me to kill you?"

His words did not help Mai at all. She began to panic slightly and stuttered as she attempted to speak. She managed to say that she had brought food courtesy of the inn. "W-would you like a meal?"

He scoffed and folded his arms. "Fine; place it on the table." And he turned his back to the uneasy Mai to stand by the window. Mai cautiously stood lifting the meal in her arms and slowly made her way into the room. She kept her eyes on the man, but managed to place the box on the table. Seemingly for no reason the man laughed quietly to himself and a smile appeared on his lips which startled Mai.

"W-what is it?"

His narrow eyes shifted to her showing great amusement. "You're a foolish human; such as the rest of them." His hand smoothly glided to the hilt of his sword and drew the blade with a hiss.

The breath in Mai's chest caught and she froze in place.

"I'll use you for some fun."

The shining blade pointed directly at Mai and fear consumed her body. As the blade drew closer she managed to take a few steps back before her back came into contact with the wall. She slid down trembling with fear as the demon of a man still neared her, blade pointed at her head.

In that moment loud cries filled the building and metallic sounds rang through the halls. Mai gasped again and felt herself curl into a ball-like shape wondering what could possibly be happening. More shouts that sounded like battle cries flew through the building and Mai noticed men running past the open screen door. Not long after there were agonizing screams that seemed louder than any battle cry. A low chuckle rumbled from the man's chest and his eyes glided over to the door to see the frantic Rounin scrambling about the Inn defending themselves and attempting to escape the carnage that ensued.

Before long, a single man stood at the entrance of the room and caught the attention of the inhabitants. Mai's eyes widened at the sight of the familiar brick colored hair and bright blue haori and an audible gasp escaped her lips. Souji's emerald eyes immediately shifted to the two bodies in the room and took in the situation; he saw the smug looking man holding a woman hostage, but it took him a moment to recognize the woman pushed into the corner. Souji's eyes widened slightly and his mouth dropped a few centimeters.

"What are you doing here?"

An amused sound emitted from the blond man and his sword dropped to his side. Souji in turn raised his sword and immediately took a fighting stance. His eyes narrowed while his foe's smile widened in

amusement. The men stared each other down for long moments without so much as a word uttered, then suddenly Souji's body sprung forward like a flash of lightning. Steel clashed against steel and rang through the room; the sharp sound pierced Mai's ears and startled her.

Her eyes scanned the room watching as the men danced around in their battle. She was shocked by their fluid movements; how they so naturally blocked and parried one another's attacks. Souji's swings were skilled and precise; he carefully calculated his movements while his opponent seemed to lazily swing his sword about, but he had immense power in his single arm that Souji found himself being pushed about the room. Souji may have been a force to be reckoned with, but he met his equal in brute strength in this man.

With one final push, the Rounin separated himself from Souji with a cocky smirk. "That's enough playing around. It's time I left; try to follow and you can be assured that only death awaits you."

Souji snickered, "Sorry pal, but you're our enemy, and you've gotta die."

Once again Souji flew at his opponent and they locked swords. Mai managed to tear her eyes away from the men long enough to get her thoughts together. Souji fought against the Rounin with all the strength and skill he had, but his opponent never seemed to waver even up against his skill. Mai felt she had to do something for Okita; he was protecting her against his opponent's tainted sword even if it had been unintentional.

Her eyes darted around the room and eventually found their way to a shelf above her head. She rose to her knees and noticed a bowl on the lowest level of shelves. It could provide just enough of a distraction that Souji could use to get the upper hand.

Mai's trembling hand gripped the bowl and her eyes slid back to the fighting samurai just in time to see them part yet again. Without taking another moment to think, her arm flew back and sprung forward, launching the bowl from her hand and directly at the blond Rounin. He barely batted an eye as his sword glided through the clay object as if it were butter.

Souji took that split second to attack his enemy.

Unfortunately, he never missed a beat and Souji's attack was blocked. They broke apart and Souji spared a glance Mai's way with a small smirk. In a low, barely audible whisper he thanked her, "Good Job, Mai."

She was shocked for a moment as she questioned whether her ears were deceiving her, but before she could lose herself in thought, the blond Rounin scoffed and insulted Souji and charged him.

His sword sliced through the air catching Souji's every swing. Souji blocked every strike, but found his recovery time slowing with each impact. Eventually, one strike nearly caught Souji off guard and he managed to block only to leave a large opening for his opponent. A triumphant smirk tweaked at the Rounin's lips and he raised his foot in a powerful kick that connected with Souji's chest. A loud, wet crack echoed in the room and in Mai's ears as Souji's body flew back

hitting the wooden shelf just to Mai's left. She stared in horror for a moment at his body crumbled to the floor. She only regained movement of her body when he slowly started to shift on the ground.

She gasped and ran to kneel by his side. Souji propped himself up with his sword and exhaled raggedly before entering a coughing fit. "Souji!" Mai cried placing her trembling hands on his shoulders. With one final violent cough, Souji pulled his hand away to reveal his palm covered in blood. Another gasp released from Mai's throat and she stared in horror at the crimson substance coating his hand.

The blond Rounin sneered at the two before him. "Is that all?" he smugly inquired as he raised his blade to their faces.

Without thinking, Mai placed herself before Souji and frighteningly gazed up at the Rounin. "Stop!"

He chuckled, "Pathetic. Do you wish to die as well?" and moved the sword closer to her throat.

Before an action could be taken against her, Mai was pushed back behind Souji's body. His breathing was ragged and heavy, but he managed to raise his sword defensively and protectively shield Mai from the samurai, arm outstretched drawing a line between the enemy.

"I'm your opponent," he managed to breathe out. "So leave her out of it."

Another sneer from the blond and he replaced his sword in its sheath. "My presence here is no longer needed. Consider yourselves lucky."

He turned his back on Mai and Souji and approached the window. Souji placed a foot forward to pursue, "Stop; I canâ€ still fight!" he barely managed to utter before falling forward. Mai gasped and sprung forward catching the now unconscious Souji in her small arms. The blond Rounin merely snickered at the poor state of his enemy and escaped through the window.

Mai held Souji in her shaking arms and attempted to breathe deeply only resulting in hiccups between the sobs ripping from her chest. She squeezed his body tightly against hers praying that he was alright; Souji had to survive this battle. He protected her when he had no real reason to. The memory of Souji threatening to kill her if she got in his way flashed in her head. She easily interfered in his battle, but he still placed himself between her and the blond Rounin to keep her from harm. She didn't understand why he did such a thing and she couldn't control her emotions.

The tears poured from her eyes as she lost all track of her surroundings.

"Hmm; what are you two doing here?" Shinpachi gazed at the two women at the gates of the Shinsengumi headquarters.

Mai glanced back at Shinpachi and Sanosuke timidly while Saki placed a hand on her hip. "What, you don't want us here?"

Sanosuke held up a hand and shook his head, "No one ever said that!"

"We came here to see how everyone is doing since the Ikedaya Incident" Mai quietly informed.

"You mean you came here to see how Okita is doing," Shinpachi smiled widely and crossed his arms.

"N-no!" she diverted her eyes sheepishly.

The men laughed and Sanosuke's eyes fell upon the bento boxes the women held in their hands. When inquired about the content, Saki explained that it was a meal for the captains to commemorate their achievement at the Ikedaya. The two men exchanged excited smiles and glanced back at the girls. They demanded they wait by the gates as they disappeared into the headquarters.

Sanosuke returned shortly with Okita at his side, though he did not seem particularly excited. Mai gasped at the sight of the man that protected her. "Okita; are you sure it's alright to be moving around?"

Sanosuke snorted and took the boxes from Saki's hands, "I told ya she was worried!" He bid the girls follow and led them inside.

Okita crossed his arms and scoffed, "There's no need for that."

"Don't complain; there's a woman worrying about you!" Sanosuke chuckled.

Yet Okita still scoffed and rolled his eyes.

Mai glanced up at the annoyed man and paused before raising her voice, "Is it really okay to be moving around?"

Okita glanced down at her with a raised brow. "I know how my body works; if I say I'm okay, I'm okay!"

"Alright"

The men lead the girls to a fairly large room where seven other men awaited their arrival. Mai noticed Heisuke immediately as he seemed to jump in his seat at the sight of them. "It's Mai and Saki!"

"And they brought food!" Shinpachi cheered while throwing a fist in the air.

As Mai and Saki served the food, they were introduced to the rest of the captains as well as the commander and vice-commander of the Shinsengumi. The men joked and laughed amongst each other and Mai and Saki happily listened to their stories.

At one point a large, bald man entered the room with a sullen look on his face. He gave a light bow excusing himself and glanced to Okita. He beckoned him forward and the two left the room together. Mai's eyes followed the men until the door shielded their bodies from her sight.

Heisuke noticed Mai's questioning eyes and leaned over to her. "That was Doctor Matsumoto. He came here to check up on all of our guys."

"Why is he talking to Okita alone?"

Heisuke shrugged his shoulders and returned to his sake while the others continued to laugh and joke with each other. The only man to rise from the group was the man introduced as Hajime Saito; he stood and bowed to excuse himself before leaving. Mai attempted to stay in the conversation with the rest of the group, but often found herself distracted and gazing at the screen. It did not take long for Saki to notice her cousins distracted state and nudged her to gain her attention.

"What's the problem?" she questioned.

Mai shook her head and tried to reassure her cousin that there was nothing wrong, but it was difficult when she could not even convince herself. She stood from her seat on the floor and bowed low excusing herself from the group. She closed the screen behind her and scanned the area looking for any sign of Okita. She saw no one, which did not prove to be much of a problem; better that no one was around to stop her in her search for Okita.

The Shinsengumi headquarters was fairly quiet as she made her way around. There were hardly any Shinsengumi members walking about and she was finding it difficult to find Okita around the large facility. Eventually her ears picked up the sound of quiet voices and she followed her senses to find Okita and the doctor from before just around the corner. They sat quietly on a bench and their voices barely reached above a whisper. Mai was puzzled at the melancholy so obvious on his face and wished to know what it was that troubled him. She took a step forward and opened her mouth to call for Okita's attention, but was cut off by the words that stumbled from the doctor's mouth.

"I'll be honest Okita," he started in a quiet voice followed by a short pause. "You have tuberculosis."

Mai's whole body froze. The famous word rang in her head like a shrill bell.

"Hmm." Okita did not seem affected by the sudden news. He looked as if he was contemplating what his next meal would be; he did not seem to be taking the news seriously. "So it was that; the famous disease?" he gave a slight chuckle. "I had a feeling it was that."

The doctor was taken aback. "You aren't surprised?"

"Why should I be; it is my body, Doc."

Mai's knees felt weak as the conversation continued. As Okita let out an amused laugh Mai's heart seemed to constrict as the word "Tuberculosis" bounced off every corner of her mind.

A glare surfaced on the doctor's face at Okita's lively manner. "This isn't a laughing matter, Okita. You should be taking this seriously!"

"Don't be fooled; I'm scared stiff, believe me!"

The doctor gave a sigh and his face softened. "You should leave the Shinsengumi and recuperate."

If possible, Okita's smile seemed to grow more and more amused the more the doctor spoke.

"Go somewhere where the air is clean. Eat healthier and keep up your energy."

"Sorry, no can do."

The doctor opened his mouth to protest Okita's decision, but was quickly cut short.

"You're asking me to leave the Shinsengumi, and I can't do that."

The doctor sighed. "Why are you so desperate to stay here?"

"My life's only got one purpose, and when I might die doesn't change that. I'm here to kill anyone who stands against the Shinsengumi; simple as that. If I die, I can't fulfill that purpose, sure. But sitting out in the country isn't going to fulfill it either. You get it? If I'm gonna die, then that's a reason for me to stay, not a reason for me to go."

There was a long pause between the two men as Okita's words sank into the earth and into the doctor's heart and mind. "I understand" he finally stated after a long bout of silence. But he also ended up countering Okita's words with his own describing the trouble that he might cause for his friends if he let his condition worsen. A smile seemed to form on his face now replacing the frown that had etched itself onto his face. "If you insist on staying," he started. "Then you must agree to do as I tell you. If you don't then I'll tell Kondou about your condition. I think we both know what he'll do."

"Low blow, Doc" Okita chuckled. His face seemed to grimace in that moment. "Man... This means I'm going to have to take some really disgusting medicine, doesn't it?"

"Of course!"

Things had gone quite for a bit and Mai was able to absorb the facts that she had heard in the last few minutes.

"_Tuberculosis._"

That meant that there was no cure for Okita. He could take medicine, but that was not a guarantee to fix him. He could take all the medicine in the world, and there was still a huge chance that he would die. The odds were hard to beat.

And he was refusing to leave the Shinsengumi in order to rest and recover what little health he had left. His devotion to the Shinsengumi was admirable, but the fact that he was just going to through his life away did not settle well with Mai. He was such a

good man, protecting the citizens of Kyoto and his comrades in the Shinsengumi and of course his attempts at protecting her from danger. How was it fair that he was to be cursed with a disease that would slowly eat away at him from the inside until there was nothing left of him in the world; until there was nothing left to remind everyone of all the good that he has done in his life. The more Mai thought the more the tears began to pile in her eyes.

Finally, though the long silence, Okita nudged the doctor with a smile. "Look, Doc... Please don't tell Kondou and the guys about this, okay? Promise?" He almost seemed afraid. Afraid and desperate.

"Well," he said slowly choosing his words carefully. "I suppose there are... Certain things that not everyone needs to know."

Another blow of pain hit Mai in her chest.

"Well, I'll be around more in the future to come by and check on you. Make sure you don't push yourself too hard, all right?"

"Thanks, Doc."

Mai hid herself behind the corner once more as the doctor rose from the bench and took his leave. Okita had not wanted anyone else to know about his illness she thought she could at least give him the illusion that he and the doctor were the only ones with the knowledge. It was the least she could give him.

It was very quiet for long moments and the thoughts were beginning to drive Mai mad. Before she lost herself to the tears and pain, she went to take her leave.

"Mai."

She suddenly froze in her tracks at the sound of Okita's voice calling out to her. Her heart stopped and dropped from her chest from fear of being caught. Neither said anything for a moment.

"C'mon, Mai. You can come out now."

Peeking from behind the corner Mai saw Okita looking straight at her with a satisfied smile. He had known somehow; he had known that there was an audience the whole time. But seeing the smile on his face after hearing such news was far too much for Mai. She shook her head violently and dashed away from the scene as quickly as her feet could carry her. How was she supposed to face Okita knowing full well that he was ill and could die so easily? She ran by the many buildings and out of the gate down the busy streets of Kyoto still fighting against the tears in her eyes. The only place she wished to go was home where her sleeping mat would welcome her and be her comfort as she cried about the man who was unjustly punished in life.

Saki returned home soon after hearing the news that Mai had run off without any warning. She was greeted by the sobs of her cousin curled under the covers of her mat. Saki inquired to her cousin's sadness, but received no answers; instead she only listened to the hiccups and cries of sorrow and rubbed the quivering back of the devastated Mai.

After long hours of tears Mai was able to lift herself from the mat and wipe the last of her tears away. Saki rubbed her shoulder and again asked what the cause of Mai's pain had been. Looking sadly into her cousin's eyes, she was finally able to explain Okita's situation to the one person she trusted in the world. She was able to release the last of her frustrations that were not purged in her earlier marathon of tears.

"It's just not fair!" Mai continuously complained. "Okita is a good man; why is he being punished like this?!"

Saki had no words to offer her cousin and instead remained silent allowing Mai to spill her heart out.

In the middle of Mai's ranting a ring was heard at the front of their home. Saki gave an apologetic look to her and rose to greet their visitor. Sliding open the door revealed the familiar peridot eyes that the girls had gotten used to seeing as of late. Okita's eyes scanned the inside of their small home then landed back on Saki.

"Isn't this where she escaped to?" he questioned with a smirk playing on his lips.

Saki was reluctant to answer at first, but directed him to their room where Mai had been quietly been waiting. Upon the sight of Okita Mai quickly glanced away in sorrow. Again reluctant, Saki stated that she needed to pick up ingredients for dinner and left Okita and Mai to themselves.

Deafening silence overtook the house as Mai refused to even look in Okita's direction. He crossed his arms and leaned his body against the door frame. "You didn't buy all of the crap the doctor was saying, did you? You don't really think I'm sick?"

Mai did not answer.

"You can't take this seriously, all right? He was just guessing; overreacting."

"He certainly seemed certain of what he was saying..." she quietly replied.

"Nah, he was just guessing! Besides, who should know better than myself?"

"But you know he was right... You said so earlier..."

He laughed slightly. "I'm telling you, it was just a guess! And you wouldn't tell anybody something like this if it were just a guess, right?" he hinted "If you tell anybody, then I'll probably have to kill you, you know."

He had said those words before. He had threatened to kill Mai if she dared get in his way and yet he threw himself into danger and protected her when he had no obligation to. The initial threat had been terrifying, but this time the threat was empty. He seemed more sad than anything else.

For the first time Mai glanced up to gaze at him. "Okita..."

He slowly turned to meet her gaze.

"I won't... I won't tell anyone..." Mai fought against the tears brimming in her eyes once more. "I promise."

His mouth curved into a smile; a gentle, honest smile.
"...Thanks."

Without another word, he left the small home and headed back to the Shinsengumi headquarters content with Mai's resolve.

Mai fought back any other tears that dared resurface and swallowed the sorrow. She wanted to be stronger; stronger for the man that would soon need all of the strength he could muster.

It seemed like the weeks flew by as Mai spent a good amount of her time looking after Okita. After contacting the doctor Matsumoto, she was able to prepare meals fit for Okita's failing health. Initially, he laughed at her attempts to take care of him, yet he still accepted her food with a smile, and, occasionally, a thanks.

The more Mai visited the Shinsengumi the more Saki accompanied her on her visits. Mai questioned her cousin's intentions, but she would always counter that Okita did not want the others to know and so she was doing both him and Mai a favor. Saki would often entertain the Shinsengumi with stories and food and drink while Mai made her way to Okita's room. Most of the time he would be awake, sitting on his mat or at a desk possibly cleaning his katana or writing something; however when Mai entered the room this time she found Okita lying back sleeping. She quietly entered and placed the bento she had made at her side as she sat to his left. She looked onto his face realizing that he seemed uncomfortable. His brow furrowed in what looked like pain and the hand placed on his stomach clenched into a fist. Mai bit her lower lip in sorrow and frustration. If only there was more that she could do for him— She placed her hand over his and squeezed thinking of a prayer for him; anything to help him get better.

Suddenly she heard a chuckle and opened her eyes to find dull green eyes gazing up at her and an amused, yet tired smirk playing on Okita's lips. "Just you again, huh?"

She couldn't help but smile even if his tone was mocking and condescending. She was just happy that he could still tease her in his state. "Yup," she commented back. "Just plain, old me."

He let out another chuckle and slowly lifted his torso from his bed. "And what are you doing back here?"

"What I'm always here for." She smiled and lifted the bento from the floor and handed it to him.

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh yay; more of that diet food. I'm jumping for joy."

"Don't complain. Doctor Matsumoto said it would make you feel better and it would help with your— condition."

"What would help would be some exercise. I want to go outside for

once."

"I don't think exercise is going to help with your sicknessâ€|"

"Hey, who knows my body better than me? If I say I need to get out, I think I know what I'm talking about."

Mai shook her head with an unavoidable smirk and unwrapped the box in his hands. "We'll see."

After ceaseless bouts of complaining and the right amount of compliments Mai decided to help Okita to his feet and accompany him outside. He smiled widely like a small child that had seen the sun for the first time. He shielded his eyes with his hand and looked about the Shinsengumi headquarters that almost seemed foreign to him now. "It's been so long!"

Mai smiled happily knowing that Okita was enjoying his trip outdoors. His mouth stretched far across his face and bouts of laughter flowed from his chest. He was so genuinely happy and it was highly contagious. Some members of the Shinsengumi walked by and smiled brightly at their captain that had been absent for so long. They greeted him warmly and congratulated him on his reappearance. They joked briefly and were on their way once again

"This is exactly what I needed!" Okita chuckled as they rounded a corner.

"I'm glad you're so happy. Do you need to rest at all?" Mai questioned.

"Are you kidding? I've been rested for way too long already! I'm ready to get back to work!"

"Are you sure you're really ready for that?"

Okita gave her a look that didn't need any amount of explaining. She sighed and shrugged her shoulders in defeat. Okita laughed and patted her head. "Let's go out to drink to celebrate!"

"And by that you're actually saying that you want to bring the Shinsengumi to Hanabi for Saki and me to cater to you and the rest of the captainsâ€|"

Okita gave a hearty laugh. "You've spent too much time around me, haven't you?"

When the idea was brought up to Hijikata, the Vice Captain of the Shinsengumi, he fought against Okita for some time before finally giving in and congratulating Okita on his better health. He did warn him to take it easy however, and clearly stated that he would not be joining them in their festivities though Okita was not terribly crushed by such information.

Shinpachi had to have been the most excited about the celebration; anything that called for drinking and food consumption was fine in his book. The captains arrived at the izakaya after closing hours and cheered at the sight of the familiar girls. They pushed tables together and crowded around as was their typical ritual and Mai and

Saki brought out food and sake for all of the men.

Though their visit had been short notice Mai, along with Saki's help, was able to prepare the specialty food for Okita's diet for the whole group. Everyone seemed to enjoy it as they had no complaints when inhaling the food; Okita however grimaced at the sight of it and eyed Mai for an explanation. She ignored his piercing gaze and returned to the back to retrieve more sake. When she delivered the rest of the sake he took her arm and pulled her close for a few hushed words.

"What is this?"

"Food, of course." Mai smiled.

"It's the same stuff you bring me every day. Don't you have anything else?"

"This is what was recommended to help you recover."

"Come on," he gently nudged her. "It's a celebration, a special occasion; you could give it a rest for once."

"Not a chance! At least one of us has to try and keep you healthy!"

"Heeey, looks like Souji and Mai are getting cozy!" Heisuke laughed from the other end of the table drawing everyone's attention.

Shinpachi, with his rosy cheeks laughed and slapped his knee. "The two love birds of the group, eh?"

"Oy, don't go spreading lies!" Okita protested giving the man a fierce glare.

All of the men laughed in chorus.

"Come on, Souji! She visits you practically every day bringing food specially made for you, and she sits at your bedside worrying about you all of the time!" Heisuke countered with a light tone.

"S-Saki and I bring food for all of you! I-it's not just special for Okita!" Mai attempted to cover her story.

"We're not stupid, girls!" Shinpachi laughed.

"We all know that Mai comes to see Okita and Saki comes to see Sano!" Heisuke snickered and downed a saucer of sake.

Saki's cheeks grew a bright shade of pink and she turned away from the men. "D-don't be ridiculous!" She earned another laugh from the men.

"Don't get us wrong; we're happy you're taking such elaborate measures to try and fool us! The food is great!"

Saki stood and began gathering the dirty dishes that were piling at the center of the tables. "You all are beginning to over stay your welcome!"

The laughter continued to ring through the small shop even when the bell hung above the entrance rang. Saki turned to the men standing under the door and in the entrance. The Shinsengumi men also diverted their gazes for a moment to take in the sights of the late night visitors. The men noticed the visitor's katana at their waists and eyes the men carefully.

Saki shook her head and gave an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, this is a private gathering. We're closed right now, but feel free to come back tomorrow!"

Okita took hold of Mai's arm once more and leaned in close while pushing her towards the back of the shop. "Go in the back and hide." He said in a low, serious voice. Mai gazed at him questioningly, but slowly stood and glanced at the second group of men.

"We won't be leaving." The leader of the men stated in a cold voice.

It was the Shinsengumi's turn to stand and place themselves before the two cousins. Shinpachi offered what was supposed to be a friendly smile and crossed his arms. "I think the lady asked you nicely to leave."

"We're not concerned with what she has to say." Another said.

"Well, you should; she's the owner of this nice place." Sanosuke commented while leaning on his trusted spear.

"It's not this place that we're interested in!" one last man growled as he drew his sword and charged the Shinsengumi followed by his comrades.

Saki cried out trying to gain their attention only to get no results. Mai grabbed her cousin's arm and attempted to lead her into the back room, but Saki struggled against Mai's grasp and continued to curse at the fighting men. Swords danced through the air and clashed into each other sending metallic cries through night air. Mai's eyes dashed around the room searching for Okita and soon found him locked in battle. He was smiling and seemed thrilled to be engaged with an enemy for the first time in far too long.

Okita's movements seemed to be a bit sluggish at first, but he slowly improved as his muscles regained the memory of movement from his previous battles. He pushed his opponent around the room with skillful slashes and expert dodges and the smile on his face seemed to mock his panicking opponent.

Though Okita seemed to be doing so well, Mai could not help but worry about his condition and if he would be alright with all of the strenuous activity. It did not take long for Mai's fears to be realized as Okita's movements suddenly stopped and his body began to quiver. His opponent stopped only for a moment before he realized that he had the perfect opportunity. He brought his sword high above his head and readied for a charge at Okita.

Mai's heart stopped for a moment and her body reacted on impulse grabbing a plate from Saki's hand and hurling it at the attacking Rounin. He stumbled as the plate smashed into side and hurriedly

searched for the source of attack. Mai took another plate when his eyes fell onto her and chuckled that one at him as well. He growled and threatened her to stay out of their business. It was Saki who threw the next plate and caused the enraged samurai to charge at the defenseless girls. Saki embraced her cousin protectively with trembling arms and they both awaited the cold steel of his katana.

A grotesquely wet sound filled their ears suddenly and a large thud attracted their attention. The Rounin lay defeated on the floor Sanosuke removing his spear from the man's back. He glanced up with worried eyes at the two girls. "Are you girls alright?"

Mai wasted no time in running to Okita's side and placing her hands on his shaking shoulders. He coughed violently and slowly crumbled to the floor. Tears filled Mai's eyes as she cried out to Okita and attempted to support his failing body. Shinpachi hurried over to them with the rest of the enemies disposed of and lifted Okita into his arms. He called to Sanosuke ordering him to find a doctor to help Okita back at the Shinsengumi headquarters. Sanosuke nodded and headed out into the streets Saki following close behind offering her help. Mai meanwhile tagged along with Heisuke and Shinpachi back to headquarters and sat by Okita's side as they waited for Saki and Sanosuke to arrive with the doctor. Shinpachi and Heisuke left to find Hijikata and explain the situation and call for doctor Matsumoto immediately.

The night seemed to drag on for Mai as Okita writhed in his bed and his skin paled and sweat beaded over his body. She patted his forehead with a wet cloth and she held his hand gladly taking the pain from his pressure if there was a chance that she was able to take a little bit of his pain from him. When the doctor arrived, he did what he could, but he had little power to help Okita. All that he could manage was to give him a minor medicinal concoction to lightly dull the pain. Though the medicine was to dull the pain it did not completely relieve him of it. Mai spent the whole night by Okita's side, wiping the sweat and holding his convulsing hand.

Doctor Matsumoto finally arrived in the late afternoon waking Mai from her sleep by Okita's side. He inspected him and sighed sadly. "There is little I can do; he over exerted himself. The only 'cure' I can offer is a place with cleaner air where he can rest."

Okita had little to say to him as he was still weak and trying to recuperate. Mai looked to the doctor and asked on Okita's behalf if he would wait and talk to Okita about his offer. The doctor sighed again knowing that Okita would fight like he did the previous time, but granted Mai the time extension.

She continued to sit by his side for a few more hours when his eyes finally fluttered open. He glanced around the room tiredly and finally found his eyes on Mai. She smiled down at him happy that he was finally conscious. A smirk surfaced on his face as he reached for one of her hands.

"Have you been there the whole time?"

"She has. She hasn't even left your side to sleep."

Mai turned to see Saki and Sanosuke in the doorway. Saki smiled at her cousin and Mai smiled back showing her relief that Okita was

awake once more. Okita gave a cocky smirk and squeezed Mai's hand with a chuckle.

"I was beginning to wonder why she was always by my side when I woke up."

"Be grateful, Souji. She seems to be the one that cares the most for your health!" Okita glanced at Mai worriedly thinking that she let his secret slip. "Don't give her that look, we all know. It wasn't that big of a secret you know."

Doctor Matsumoto joined their conversation in that moment as he made an appearance in the doorway. "If you want to blame anyone for letting your secret out you should blame me. Your friends deserved an answer to your poor health as of late and your scene last night could not go unanswered for."

Okita sighed and found himself squeezing Mai's hand with more force. Mai glanced at him and squeezed back feeling his uneasiness. She took his hand in hers and gave him a sympathetic and apologetic look. Okita noticed her attempts to comfort him and he tried to brush the disappointment off of his face. "Aw, whatever; it's not like I'm going to let this hold me back." And he struggled to sit up.

Mai helped him weakly sit up from his bed and smiled when he showed one of his trademark smirks. Doctor Matsumoto shook his head and scolded Okita for exerting himself. Okita merely blew him off and glanced to Mai. "Help me outside?"

"I really don't think you should move so muchâ€¦" she quietly commented while minding the stern looks that Matsumoto gave from the doorway.

"I just want some fresh air. That's what the doc has been complaining about this whole time; so it should be alright if we just sit just outside the door, right?" he gave a mocking smile to the doctor who in turned sighed tiredly not wanting to fight with Okita and gave his permission for him to move about.

Mai clumsily helped Okita up and shuffled to the door where she carefully helped him into a sitting position and took a seat right next to him.

"If you're feeling winded or uneasy, don't even attempt moving. Just lay down, Souji." Matsumoto informed giving a stern look at the smirking Okita.

"Ah, that sounds like a good idea!" he chuckled and placed his head comfortably in Mai's lap. Mai gasped and released a few jumbled syllables from her mouth rather than finding the ability to speak out. Her cheeks fired to a light pink color as Okita looked up at her with his usual cheeky smile; it was hard to believe that just a few hours ago he was trembling and in tremendous amounts of pain when he was able to smile the way he did. "What; you want me to be comfortable, don't you?"

Mai still could not find her voice and merely nodded her head.

Doctor Matsumoto placed himself on the floor quietly across from Mai

and Okita and his face became very serious. "Now, about your health, Souji."

Saki interjected momentarily, "Umm, sorry; I just have something first." She directed her attention to Mai with a smile. "Sanosuke is going to escort me back to the izakaya; he's going to help me clean up after last night"

Mai remembered the attack which caused Okita's tuberculosis attack the night before and jumped slightly. "I can help too"

"No, no!" Saki waved her hands to motion Mai to stay as she was. "I think Sanosuke and I can handle it. Stay her with Okita." She smiled with a hint on mockery behind it causing Mai's cheeks to light up a bit more.

They waved their goodbyes and Saki and Sanosuke left Mai and Okita with the doctor.

"Now, Okita," he spared no more time dawdling. "I highly recommend leaving Kyoto and going someplace with cleaner air where you don't have to worry about fighting."

"I already told you before, that I'm not just going to leave the Shinsengumi."

"Do you really think slowly killing yourself is going to help the Shinsengumi?"

"I still have some fight in me, Doc."

"But" Mai cut into the conversation rather quietly. "But what If you run out of fight in the middle of a battle?" Okita glanced up at her in surprise. "Your life could be ended so easily"

Okita sighed and took hold of one of her hands. "I said that I was born to kill anyone that got in the Shinsengumi's way. That's what I want to keep doing; I want to help Kondou for as long as I can."

"But" wouldn't you just be getting in their way?"

Both Matsumoto and Okita looked to Mai with wide eyes at the depth of her words.

"So in a sense you would be the one thing that you want to fight against for the sake of the Shinsengumi. But" that doesn't mean you have to die; not all of you at least!"

"What are you going on about?" Okita questioned.

"The real Okita doesn't have to die, only a part of him. If the Captain of the Shinsengumi part of Okita died, then you could just be" Okita. And you could live out the rest of your life in a peaceful place not having to worry about all of the fighting and the blood."

A glare began to surface on Okita's face as he listened to her explanation. "And what kind of life would that be? Being 'just Okita' in some boring place rotting away as the man that deserted the

Shinsengumi?"

"No one said you would desert them!"

"I might as well! Running away before the war is even over; what kind of man does that make me?"

"A live one!" Mai's throat began to clench as their argument continued on and Okita fought against her proposal.

"Alive and a coward!" he scoffed and directed his eyes from Mai.

"But!" Mai choked. "I don't want you to die!"

Okita shook his head as he felt a wet droplet hit his cheek and realized that Mai now had tears dripping from her eyes. She was trying to hide the pain that welled in her chest, but he could obviously see from her tears and her strained attempts at keeping her voice from cracking. A pain built up in his chest as well, but it was not the pain of his illness that was affecting him. Seeing the tears of an innocent girl that wanted no more than to see him live gave him a pain that was almost more unbearable than the pain from his condition.

He sighed and reached a hand to her face to wipe a tear from her cheek. "I'll!" he started and ended with a sigh. "I'll think about it!"

A smile sprang to Matsumoto's face. "I know of a quite village up north that would be perfect for your condition. I would be happy to explain the village to you if you would like."

"Maybe later!" Okita waved to Matsumoto with an irritated gaze and an eyebrow raised.

Matsumoto laughed and stood saying that should Okita wish to know more about the small village that he should send someone to retrieve him. Okita waved him off then glanced up at the eyes that had been crying a few moments ago.

Mai blinked tears away and rubbed her now irritated eyes that were beginning to swell and turn red. Okita gave a soft chuckle and reached up once more to brush her tear stained cheek. "You know, that's what I would call cheating." He informed with a soft smile. Mai only gazed down at him in confusion. "Crying is not fair at all."

"I'm sorry," she sniffled. "I just!"

Okita shook his head not wanting her to have to explain herself. "Let's just sit here and enjoy the fresh air."

A smile slipped its way onto her lips and she nodded in agreement. They sat together enjoying the air and sun for a few long hours barely saying anything to each other; just enjoying each other's presence. They gazed over the walls of the Shinsengumi headquarters onto the rooftops of the town that still seems oddly unfamiliar to Okita since his diagnosis. At one point a large column of smoke caught Mai's eyes and she called Okita's attention to it. He shrugged

his shoulders and speculated that a building had either caught fire or was set ablaze by a group of scandalous Rounin trying to prove a point to someone. Mai commented on how horrible it was, but she knew that there were people like that in the world. She sighed and pushed the thought to the back of her head and decided to continue to enjoy her time with Okita.

Night was beginning to fall and Okita had fallen into a light sleep a few hours earlier. Mai did not mind being Okita's person pillow for the night when he looked so peaceful and free of pain. She smiled to herself and brushed some of the hair from his face admiring the peaceful look that he wore as he slept. It was a nice change from the scrunched appearance that would adorn his face when he was being affected by his sickness.

She was beginning to wonder if maybe she should head home when the familiar red hair of Sanosuke Harada caught her eye. He slowly crossed the expanse of the headquarters guiding Saki. Upon closer inspection Mai noticed that Harada was covered in a black substance and Saki looked completely horrified. When Mai called out for her cousin Okita stirred from his rest and turned his head to gaze at the people that held Mai's attention. Noticing the uneasy aura that drifted off of the two he slowly rose from Mai's lap into a sitting position to observe them. Mai immediately stood and ran for Saki and Harada.

"Saki, what's wrong?" The smell of smoke drifted to her nose and her stomach churned anxiously. "Didâ€¦ did something happenâ€¦?"

Saki hardly seemed to register that Mai was right in front of her.

Harada looked down sadly at the two girls. "You're izakayaâ€¦ it was set fire to by the group of Rounin that attacked last nightâ€¦"

Okita scoffed in disappointment. "So their buddies got upset that we showed them how to behave and they set fire to their izakaya?! What kind of men are they?!"

Harada glanced at Okita, "Getting angry isn't going to help anything." He shook Saki's shoulders gingerly trying to gain her attention, but she still seemed far off in another world. "Is Doctor Matsumoto still here?"

Mai jumped at the chance and dashed about the headquarters looking for the doctor. Once she found him and with a little guidance from Okita, she led the doctor to Harada's room where he had laid Saki down to rest her rigid body.

"She's gone through a good deal of stress over the past few hoursâ€¦" Matsumoto reported after examining Saki. "There isn't much we can do, but let her rest for until she acknowledges us once more."

Mai sat by Saki's side for long moments just staring at the girl that she depended on most in the world. Saki had been more than just a cousin and more than a sister figure; she was Mai's best friend and looked after her while her uncle was around and long after he had passed. Saki was always there, and Mai wanted to do the same for her.

She sat by her side for long hours feeling her body becoming heavier as the time slowly passed by. Okita and Harada never left their sections of the room each watching over the girls that had been robbed of their lives in a single night. Okita sighed finally deep into the night and slowly stood from his portion of the floor and made his way to Mai. He placed his hands on her shoulders gently and leaned down to her ear. "You should get some rest, Mai."

She shook her head weakly. "I can't leave Saki like thisâ€¦"

"Exhausting yourself isn't going to help her."

"But I shouldn't leave her aloneâ€¦"

Okita coaxed Mai onto her feet and allowed her to lean some of her weight against him. "Saki won't be alone. I can guarantee that Harada will watch over her all night."

Mai tried to protest.

"We can't have you staying up all night again and pushing yourself over your limit."

Mai had no energy left to protest and allowed Okita to lead her where ever he felt she needed to go.

In the morning Mai awoke to find that she was tucked under the covers of a sleeping mat and alone in a room. She stood and peered outside of the door to find the sun shining down on the Shinsengumi headquarters. Without wasting any more time she took off down the halls to the room where Saki was sleeping the night before. It was time to be by Saki's side now that she was well rested and could care for her cousin.

When Mai was nearly to Saki's room Okita appeared in her path with a happy smirk. "Good morning."

"Okitaâ€¦"

"I knew you would head for Saki the moment you woke up. Good think I caught you first."

"I need to be with Saki." Mai stated firmly and made a move to get by Okita which ended in poor results.

Okita stepped in her path and wrapped an arm around hers and lead her away from the room. She protested and struggled to get out of his grasp. "Remember what I told you last night? You're no good to Saki if you don't take of yourself too; so let's get you some food and then you can be with your cousin. I promise Harada is still with her."

Mai sighed and ceased her struggled and followed obediently to the dining area. The room was empty save her and Okita. He sat her down and exited the room for a moment to bring in a tray of food. Mai looked him over as he placed the food in front of her. "Are you sure it's okay to be moving around as much as you are?"

He scoffed playfully and flicked her forehead. "I may be sick, but I can at least walk around. A little walking never hurt anyone."

A small smile managed to stretch onto her lips and she thanked Okita for the food and began eating. He had not brought in any food for himself, but he did not seem to mind as he just watched Mai as she enjoyed her own food. She didn't seem to notice as she had so many things running through her mind at one time and it was quite for long moments.

Okita was the first one to break the silence. "You seemed pretty worried last night. Almost couldn't talk you into leaving Saki's side."

Mai looked up from her food a bit surprised at Okita's words. "I was worried about herâ€¦ Saki is the one person I had in the world after my uncle passedâ€¦ and I know I can depend on her. I don't know what I would do without herâ€¦"

Okita shrugged. "Why don't you go make something of your life?"

Mai's face contorted to show even more confusion than before.

"You don't have to depend on anyone anymore. You're a strong girl, so go out and do something that will make you happy. You don't have the izakaya to hold you down anymore; stop depending on other people and start depending on yourself."

Mai had nothing to say for a moment, but soon started to giggle. Okita raised a brow. "I'm not the strong person you think I am. There's no way I could go do something without someone there beside me."

"Don't put yourself down, Mai." Okita softly said while taking one of her small hands in his large one. "Don't you have any idea what you've been going through for the past few months?"

"You were attacked by a madman a couple months ago, and, even though it was terrifying, you didn't let that stop you from coming around the Shinsengumi which attract trouble like Inari attracts Kitsune! And on top of that you keep showing up around here to take care of me; that's no small feat, I think you know that!"

Mai giggled.

"And even when things are falling apart: my health, your izakaya, Saki's mental state, you aren't breaking to pieces in front of everyone. You're fighting to help, to fix all that you can. You're stronger than you think."

Mai was stunned by his words and was at a loss for her own. Finally her voice was found, "But, you know, even strong people break at some pointâ€¦"

"Sure, I guess."

"So I need someone there in case one day I do just crumble to piecesâ€¦ I need someone to depend on."

"Well, you can't depend solely on Saki anymore. I think we both know that she's found someone that she can depend on." Mai nodded her head with a slight smile. "So go out there and find a person that you can depend on most in this world."

Mai was silent for a moment lost in thought. She finally glanced up to meet Okita's peridot green eyes and spoke, "Can I depend on you?"

Okita was silent for a moment before he burst into a fit of laughter and tears. "Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?!" Mai waited for Okita to quite his laughter so that she could hear his explanation. "You want to depend on a man that could croak at any minute?"

"I feel at ease around you, and you've always protected me up to this point. I feel that you would be the best person in the world for me to put my trust in."

Okita seemed properly surprised by her words and he was left utterly speechless.

"So can I depend on you?"

Suddenly his arms wrapped around her in a tight embrace. Her cheeks flushed a brilliant shade of red and she was unsure of what to do.

"Sorry." He whispered in her ear. "I just really felt like I had to hold you." It seemed he had a bit of trouble with his words as his voice trembled just the slightest bit. "This feeling It feels like my heart's about to break, but I'm happy?" He gave a slight pause as his grip tightened. "You're a really mysterious girl."

Eventually he pulled away and a smile was firmly planted on his face.

"Okita?"

His smile grew. "Come to the country with me?"

Mai was utterly stunned at his forward question.

"You can depend on me only if I can depend on you. So come to the countryside with me?"

Slowly Mai's mind processed what he was asking a large smile began to spread across her lips and tears welled in her eyes. "Alright!"

Later that night Saki opened her eyes and apologized to everyone for being troublesome which Mai and Sanosuke denied quickly. Within a few days Saki was mostly back to her normal self with the exception of the izakaya. She was devastated that they had lost their business in a matter of minutes and that there was little for the two of them to do.

The Shinsengumi commander, Isami Kondou, was kind enough to let both of them stay in the headquarters for a few days to ensure that the Rounin that set fire to their izakaya did not come after them as well. It was soon announced that the Shinsengumi would be changing

headquarters soon and would soon move from Kyoto to be a bit closer to the action of the war.

Mai was anxious when Okita managed to gain permission from Doctor Matsumoto to travel with the Shinsengumi for just a little longer, but she allowed him pleasures for the time being. As soon as he moved up North the chance of seeing any of his comrades again was slim at best. It would be wrong to take him away so soon if he was still in good condition and because Mai had deemed herself Okita's personal caretaker she was allowed to follow along with the moves that the Shinsengumi underwent over the next few years. Saki had managed to persuade Kondou into letting her tag along promising she would cook for the men and work to help out the Shinsengumi. The cousins were allowed a little more time together even if it was during the Warring States Period of Japan in the heat of battle.

Okita's condition seemed to worsen a little each day and anytime she got, Mai would beg Okita to take the trip up North to the village that Doctor Matsumoto had talked about, but Okita would argue for more time and Mai did not have the heart to deny him more time amongst his comrades.

A day finally came when Sanosuke and Shinpachi announced that they were leaving the Shinsengumi to pursue another end of the battle. Sanosuke and Shinpachi would always be allies to the Shinsengumi, but they could not keep up with the ever changing Kondou and his Western battle tactics that were being picked up to counter the enemy. With Sanosuke leaving Saki also took her leave and traveled with both men. It was a tearful goodbye, but both girls knew that it would come someday.

Saki promised to send letters to Doctor Matsumoto as he would be the one that would always know where Okita was and she wished Mai the best of luck in life.

The Shinsengumi was slowly growing smaller and Okita's health gradually grew weaker. He finally gave into Mai's pleas and traveled up North with Mai and Doctor Matsumoto to begin a new life without battle.

"Souji!" Mai called into the air looking through the fields for familiar brick colored hair. She shook her head when she saw a speck or red in the distance and headed in that direction. She found her target relaxing in the shade of a large tree and she shook her head with a smile. "If you're tired, go take a nap in your bed."

Souji chuckled and glanced at her. "I like being outside."

"I should know better." Mai scoffed.

"Yeah, you should have." He smiled reaching up and tugging on her arm pulling her onto the grassy shade next to him. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his head against hers closing his eyes gently.

Mai blushed and gazed at his closed lids. "Soujiâ€¦"

"I love you." He whispered suddenly.

Mai's cheeks flared brightly. "Don't go saying thingsâ€¦"

His eyes opened revealing his serious nature. "â€| I'm not just saying things."

She giggled and snuggled close to him.

"So you have to listen to what I'm going to say."

"Hmm?" she questioned looking back into his eyes.

"No matter what happens; if we are separated one dayâ€| my heart belongs to you."

Her heart fluttered. Souji took her hand and threaded his fingers through hers.

"Well?"

Mai held back her tears and nodded. "Yes. Even if we're separated my heart will always and forever be yours."

Souji sighed and his eyes slid shut while a relieved smile formed on his lips. "Thank goodness."

Mai giggled and snuggled closer to him.

The couple lay in the grassy fields surrounded by clean air to heal the pains of a sickness. Though it still had a presence, it did not tear the two apart. They just spent all of the time they had together napping in the grassy fields, the sun warming their skin and the soft breeze to cool them.

End
file.